Posted 1/26/2004 8:54 PM Updated 2/3/2004 5:30 PM

Mentoring swells into 'a movement'

By In-Sung Yoo, USA TODAY

Todd Kulaga might not have fit the mold of what people might consider the typical child in need of mentoring. Growing up in middle-class Pawtucket, R.I., during the '80s, he wasn't troubled or violent — hardly a broken spirit in need of saving.

But his dad died when he was 7 years old, and his mother believed he needed a solid male presence in his life. So she had him matched with a mentor at the local Big Brothers Big Sisters chapter. His mentor was a local television personality by the name of Matt Lauer.

Now 32, Kulaga serves on the board of advisers for that same Big Brothers group. Lauer, of course, has gone on to become the host of NBC's *Today Show*. The two recently were reunited on the show for the first time in 20 years and are featured on the Web site of Big Brothers Big Sisters during National Mentoring Month.

Big Brothers are expected to visit their "littles," as they're called, once a week. Lauer, who was 23 at the time, "picked me up sometimes three, four times in a week," Kulaga says. "He taught me to give back, that there's more to life.

"A lot of what we did was going to games, watching sports on TV. He came to just about every game I had. I played baseball, basketball, and football. So every season of the year, I had games three or four nights a week, and he was at every one he could go to."

Like millions of children before and since, Kulaga benefited from mentoring. It's an effort that some leaders in the field say is coming into its own only now — 100 years after Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the largest mentoring program in the country, was founded.

An army is growing

"Mentoring is finally a movement," says Susan Weinberger of the Mentor Consulting Group, a private firm that helps companies operate mentoring programs. Weinberger, who has been active in the field for 20 years as both a researcher and practitioner, says government support for mentoring programs is at an all-time high, and programs themselves have improved, creating better screening processes and better organization of their national efforts. Volunteers are stepping forward in record numbers; the number of one-to-one matches for Big Brothers Big Sisters has climbed from 110,000 in 1999 to 210,000 in 2003.

"The demographics are absolutely on our side," says Judy Vredenburgh, president and chief executive officer of Big Brother Big Sisters, who attributes the increase to "baby boomers becoming empty-nesters and a trend of young adults coming forth."

Much of the increase began with the founding of MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership in 1990, now the leading advocacy group for mentoring in the USA. It's also the umbrella group for most local mentoring organizations, including Big Brothers Big Sisters. The umbrella group established a set of quality standards for mentoring programs, which as recently as 20 years ago were not even required to conduct criminal background checks, Weinberger says.

The extensiveness of screening procedures varies from group to group. There are no statistics on how many mentoring groups have mandatory criminal background checks, and no state laws that require such checks. Proposed legislation in New York, if passed, would make it the first state to mandate criminal background checks.

The needs of the kids themselves have changed drastically, too, she says. "The issues are more severe certainly, with teen-age pregnancy, youth smoking, violence, drugs, obesity and bullying. All of these must be addressed in mentor training."

A landmark study in 1995 by a Philadelphia-based research group, Public/Private Ventures, was the first to show the benefits of one-on-one mentoring. The researchers tracked 500 mentored, at-risk young people ages 10 to 16 from mostly urban, single-parent homes and compared them with a control group of 500 kids still on the wait list for mentors.

The study found that mentoring had a substantial positive effect in several important areas, including school attendance, drug and alcohol use and violent behavior.

Ben Shamburger, 45, has found that to be true in his mentoring experience. Shamburger, an operations supervisor with the Social Security Administration in Delaware, has been paired with 17-year-old B.J. Lofland, a young man from a tough neighborhood who was pugnacious from the time Shamburger first met him as a 5-year-old. Shamburger taught B.J. that fighting accomplishes little. Shamburger says that at first, he "didn't fully appreciate the power and influence you can have as a mentor."

"Kids pay attention and notice things," he says. "I didn't fully appreciate that until he got older and we would have conversations and he would tell me about things he had observed, that I was unaware that he was even paying attention to." B.J. is now studying to enter either the Air Force or college.

Economist and Nobel Prize winner James Heckman of the University of Chicago, who has researched the development of non-cognitive abilities such as

motivation, persistence and self-discipline, says the mentoring approach is uniquely effective, not only for the individual, but also for society as a whole.

"The implications are enormous when you think about the prevention of crime, the importance of returning to schooling, the reduction of poverty, the various overall effects on income and social inequality in the United States," he says.

A 'cultural expectation'

It is those societal benefits that Jay Winsten of the Harvard Mentoring Project believed in when he created National Mentoring Month.

He's the same man who was tapped to develop the national designated driver campaign in the late '80s. The aim is to make the concept of mentoring a part of the "cultural expectation" Winsten says.

For his previous campaign, "the idea was to promote a new social role — that of the designated driver — and along with it a new social norm and expectation, that the driver doesn't drink," he says. "The question was: Can we, in similar fashion, promote the social role of the mentor, and in so doing promote a social norm and expectation about giving back to the community?"

Congress is set to approve $100 million in support for mentoring programs in fiscal year 2004 — more than twice the amount approved for mentoring in any previous year. Half will go to mentoring programs for students in Title I schools; the other half will go to children whose parents are incarcerated.

Heckman says the money is a good investment. "What we know for sure is that these mentoring programs have a big effect, a statistically significant and substantial effect in having children go to school, keeping them in school, and promoting their absorption into society as full-functioning healthy members."

No obstacle too big

Karen Hays of Oakville, Conn., has experienced the benefits of mentoring in her own life. She grew up legally blind, like her mother and two older sisters. Shy and low on self-esteem as an 8-year old, she credits her Big Sister of 14 years — Beth Barrett, a successful trial lawyer who has a nerve disorder that requires her to use a wheelchair — for showing her that having a disability was just another chance to shine.

"She taught me to not accept anything," says Hays, now 21 and set to graduate from Central Connecticut State College in 2004. "I had this mindset that I'm legally blind, there's all these things I can't do, whereas Beth showed me what I could do."